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Claudia Leskien, *Operation Welcome: How Strasbourg Remained a Seat of European Institutions, 1949-1979*. Brussels: Peter Lang, 2016. 330 pp. References and appendices. \$62.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-2-87574-316-9.

Review by Timothy Andrews Sayle, University of Toronto.

If all politics is local, then is the history of politics—even that of supranational institutions like those of the European Union—local, too? Claudia Leskien’s answer is yes. The premise of her research, namely that historians must consider the municipal level of governance when studying the history of the European communities, offers a number of intriguing possibilities for research and analysis. Leskien examines one narrow aspect of the municipal-supranational relationship in *Operation Welcome*, asking: what role did local actors play maintaining Strasbourg as the seat of both the Council of Europe and the Common Assembly of the European Steel and Coal Community (what is now the European Parliament), and what were their strategies?

In 1949, British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin spontaneously proposed Strasbourg as the site for the Council of Europe. Statesmen and citizens of Europe in the 1940s would have grasped the symbolism of the Alsatian city for a project meant to foster Franco-German rapprochement. As Leskien explains, however, the practicality of hosting the dignitaries of Europe in Strasbourg was another matter entirely. Trains to Strasbourg were slow, there was no major airport, and a large portion of the city’s lodging had been destroyed during the war. Nonetheless, the Council of Europe arrived. Not long after, Strasbourg was also anointed the provisional seat of the Common Assembly. *Operation Welcome* is an examination of how local actors worked to keep the institutions in their city and ultimately to have Strasbourg declared the permanent seat of the European Parliament.

The extant historiography of European institutions is not without reference to the municipal government of Strasbourg. The usual focus is on the influential French politician and Mayor of Strasbourg, Pierre Pfimlin. Leskien targets this historical “myth of Pierre Pfimlin” and argues he was largely a figurehead (p. 24). Instead, she focuses on a range of local actors, including bureaucrats and members of public organizations who cooperated in order keep European institutions in Strasbourg (an appendix to the book lays out the list of actors and their public and private roles). These actors worked in what Leskien calls a “bubble-like structure,” safe from outside influences like elections. The book deals hardly at all with the Strasbourg public’s view of the Council of Europe or the European Parliament, for all evidence suggests to Leskien “the population did not pay particular attention to European session periods” (p. 272).

Over one very lengthy and three short chapters, Leskien catalogues the efforts taken by this small, but powerful group of local actors to develop Strasbourg’s reputation as a host city, to improve its transportation infrastructure, and to build the physical edifices required to house the institutions and their staff. A chapter on “Hosting Europe” examines how officials organized receptions, presentations, conferences, and other activities to ensure that visiting European representatives enjoyed the city. It

also examines the steps officials took to advertise Strasbourg as a “European” capital (more on this, below). Another chapter, on transportation networks, considers the efforts of officials to play up Strasbourg’s central—and therefore ideal—position in Europe, even though its transportation hub remained less than ideal. Leskien illustrates how officials worked to advertise the city despite its limited accessibility. In a 1950 map printed to accompany promotional material, “no concrete modes of transportation and routes were given, but arrows superimposed on the map of Europe, converging from all directions towards the Alsatian city” pointed to its geographic centrality (p. 177). Then follows a highly detailed consideration of air traffic improvements and public transportation. This is municipal policy recorded up close and at the ground level. For example: “the extension of the regular bus line in the evening by two busses, sparked little controversy and counted among the recurrent arrangements for each session period” (p. 210). The chapter on building the physical structures to house the European institutions captures the difficult balance city officials sought to strike: they had to provide facilities attractive enough to help make the case Strasbourg should remain the seat, while always conscious that the assembly seat was provisional and might ultimately be relocated. The chapter ends, fittingly, with the building of the Palais de l’Europe, the architecturally breathtaking seat of both the Council of Europe and, for two decades, the European Parliament.

Readers should consult Leskien for an in-depth account of what local actors did to consolidate Strasbourg’s role as a seat of European institutions, but not an explanation for why they took these actions. Leskien assumes that officials in Strasbourg wished to remain as the seat of European institutions in hopes of gaining economic benefit for the city. But she finds little archival evidence that this was the case (except for studies conducted in the 1980s, beyond her periodization). Lacking concrete records, she chooses not to engage with the relationship between the local actors’ efforts to maintain the seat and any economic benefit to the city.

The uncertainty over economic incentives might have provided other opportunities to consider the local actors’ motivations. It might have been helpful to place the efforts of Strasbourg officials within a broader understanding of how French municipal governments viewed their role and function. Leskien, however, specifically eschews any comparative element for her study and rules out comparing the city’s efforts with either other French municipalities or cities such as Brussels or Luxembourg with similar European institutions. Leskien has also limited her archival research to the municipal and prefecture records. As a result, she acknowledges that the “successes of local actors might be overstated” (p. 26).

Perhaps one of Leskien’s most curious decisions is to advise readers that the “concept of Europeanization and its impact on various government structures will not be considered here” (p. 30). Yet the book touches frequently on issues of Europeanization. City officials sought to portray Strasbourg as having a millennia-old “*vocation Européenne*” (p. 85). In the chapter on hosting, Leskien points out that the history of the city and the region was cherry-picked and embellished to prove that Strasbourg had forever been a “European” city. For instance, officials were only too pleased to link Charlemagne’s 775 founding of Notre-Dame de Strasbourg and the accompanying river navigation rights to the Rhine as embodying an early sense of European mission. And this before all of the very heavy symbolism of Strasbourg and Alsace in Franco-German relations from 1871 on, it should be noted. Leskien notes that the official letterhead from the municipality pays homage to Strasbourg’s role as a European city, and the city uses the country code EU, like other European Union institutions, and not the country code for France.

The Europeanization of Strasbourg was not simply a project of government, but of private organizations whose members wished to advertise Strasbourg as the obvious home for the symbols and structures of a new Europe. Was this simply a public affairs routine or did these efforts express how the local actors understood Strasbourg? If it was a bit of both, as seems likely, where lay the balance? And what can we learn about the tensions between municipal, national, and continental identity? They were certainly complex. Leskien tells how one municipal counsellor had opposed the European presence in

Strasbourg, worried that it would “negate ‘Frenchness’ and allow for the infiltration of the administration by the Germans” (p. 51). Unintentionally, it seems, *Operation Welcome* reinforces the case that municipal archives are a rich vein for scholars to tap when engaging the question of Europeanization.

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